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Negotiating the Diasporic Domestic Space: An Observation on domestic rhythms in Dying in
a Strange Country

Abstract: Home is a perfect domestic space that integrates memories of past and present. No home is new; as wherever we live, we retain the memories of the past dwelling places providing us with a sense of stability and comfort. This could be clearly perceived in the experiences of diaspora. The diaspora is a continually modified space, sometimes expansive in nature with the individual being subjected to constantly evolving complex identities without any point of reference. The domestic space for the diaspora has multiple meanings and operates at various levels, under various forms and contributes to the definition of the everyday integrating the variegated rhythms and thus defining the identity in relation to the space-time duality. This paper through a reading of Tahira Naqvi's dying in a Strange Country tries to explore how the rhythms of past and present interact and negotiate to create a perfect "lived" experience for the diasporic subject.

The house is the primary unit of measurement and point of reference for a spatial politics, a human scale which determines the nature of our relationship to the immediate environment and beyond that to the culture as a whole. 'Where do you live?' figures amongst the key questions which momentarily arrest the narratives of identity, how we

answer determining our place within a grid of co-ordinates which plot social subjectivity (Bird 119)

The diaspora is a continually modified space, sometimes expansive in nature with the individual being subjected to constantly evolving complex identities without any point of reference. The domestic space for the diaspora has multiple meanings and operates at various levels, under various forms and contributes to the definition of the everyday integrating the variegated rhythms and thus defining the identity in relation to the space-time duality. Home is not just a building but is closely connected to the physical, mental and psychological aspects of the individual.

Home, both as a 'lived' space and imaginary entity, provides the necessary emotional parameters to define the identity and becomes a synonym for stability, intimacy and security. The rhythms (as perceived by Henri Lefebvre), in its various forms and nature interact in order to create a lived experience for the inhabitants of the home. The parameters that define ethnicities, culture, beliefs, and a sense of community and belonging are built within the walls of a home through the constant interactions with various internal and external rhythms. But as physical and cultural boundaries extend, enabling the construction of new homes, stability becomes less possible a thought with the individual being subjected to constant spatial negotiations as a result of arrhythmia. Thus home for the diaspora is always a struggle that demands completion and unambiguity.

A negotiation and sometimes a sense of completeness in the new and strange surrounding can be brought forth only through a close examination of the surroundings by being an insider and outsider at the same time. Every home and every surrounding has certain rhythms embedded in them. By being an outsider and an insider at the same time, an individual gets to perceive rhythms and imbibe them.

“In order to grasp and analyze rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them... to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to be grasped by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, and abandon oneself to its duration.” (Lefebvre 37). The diasporic subject in this regard is a perfect rhythm analyst; being an insider and outsider to the rhythms at the same time. The individual’s new domestic space, mostly being set up in the backdrop of an urban space, repels the individual from having a feeling of being at home. The memory of the homeland and the immigrant trauma further removes the diasporic subject from enjoying the urban domestic experiences. Thus the individual remains an outsider, passively looking at the new domestic space or home without the feeling of being inside. This paper tries to explore how the diasporic subjects in Tahira Naqvi’s *Dying in a Strange Country* take the role of a rhythm analyst and negotiate with their domestic spaces to find a space for themselves in a ‘strange’ country.

The moments of the everyday play out rhythmically in a ‘home’ space and provide its inhabitants a sense of belonging, stability and a sense of identity with reference to the space. A new ‘home’ space distorts the individual’s rhythmic patterns and projects a strangeness around; pushing back the subject to the memories of the past without being able to reconnect to the present. By assuming the role of a rhythm analyst the diasporic subject could perceive the external strange rhythms and connect them to the internal bodily rhythms and thus bringing forth a sense of belonging. The rhythms of the adopted homeland are in way appropriated or negotiated by the diasporic subject through an active or passive observation of the rhythms around.

Various stories in *Dying in a Strange Country* see the domestic and urban spaces of the US through the eyes of women protagonists, mostly first generation Pakistani immigrants. The subjects being women, who are mostly unemployed and confined to their homes, we get to take a close look at the domestic spaces of the immigrants. For South Asians displacement trauma and negotiation to a new domestic space are not stories anew for they were subjected to colonial

rule and partition. But still necessity to make a 'home' within a busy city is a new experience for the South Asian immigrants. The domestic spaces in capitalist nations are never captivating experience as the immigrant is torn between the time and space unable to find a trace of memory and self. In fact they assume a dual existence living in dual space and time contributed by their memory and their present.

Time is a factor that attaches an individual to the present and the everyday. Sakina Bano enroute the US is split between the time zones, unable to recognise the time and space and thereby struggle identify her presence in the world around. Naqvi writes on Sakina Bano's time-space perplexity as "Day and night seemed to cross over so rapidly she didn't know whether to sleep or remain awake...A German clock keeping German time; what could it mean to her?" (4-5) The movements and buzzles round her leaves her anxious leaving her bodily rhythms into an "arrhythmic flurry" (5) but her recollections on the rhythms of her homeland in her conversation with Abida arouses a sense of confidence and a sense of the present in Sakina Bano. Naqvi avers:

The two women reminisced about places they both knew in Lahore, Abida's hometown; the Anarkali Bazar where every day men, women and children roamed about as if a carnival was in progress, Bano bazaar where woman may find all she ever wanted, McLeod Road where all the cinema houses were and where mammoth film posters rose like walls guarding a city, and the shrine of the Data Sahib where you made vows and prayers were answered. (5)

Like the rhythms of the city the domestic rhythms are always constrictive; for the individual fails to identify the space as one's own. Each and every aspect of domesticity, which includes the drawing room settings, the kitchen, bedroom, windows, is integral to the construction of a space. Each of this sets a rhythmic pattern within the home, determined by the arrangement of furniture, the positioning of the kitchen or the bedroom etc., is mostly unnoticeable to the

inhabitants. For Sakina Bano, the ambience of Asad's apartment brought forth nostalgic memories of their "spacious" house in Sabir Street. The recollection of memories past would often enable us to negotiate with the present and new spaces. According to Bachelard Gaston it is our imagination and memories of the past surroundings that help us negotiate with the present. So, one "experiences the house in its reality and its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams." (Gaston 5) Thus the arrhythms of the present surroundings could evoke the fictional rhythms (memories) of the past in order help one negotiate with the surroundings.

The window is yet another spot where the present and the presences interact with memories. For a diasporic rhythm analyst the window is the perfect spot for analysing the internal and external rhythms by being a passive observer but actively participating in the rhythms around. According to Lefebvre, "In order to grasp and analyze the fleeting object, which is not exactly an object, it is therefore necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside ... from the window noises distinguish themselves, the flows separate out, rhythms respond to one another." (37-38) In the story "Brave We Are", we could find the Connecticut housewife Zenab observing the town from her window and reminiscing about Lahore. She avers:

The kitchen window that I now face as I do innumerable times during the day, faithfully reflects the movements of time and seasons of the small town in Connecticut where we live, compelling the spirit to buoyancy or, when the tones on its canvas are achromatic and dark, to melancholy, to sadness... Why does snow in February always remind me of February in Lahore? Incongruent, disparate, the seasons have so little in common. March is spring, grass so thick your foot settles into it, roses that bloom firm, their curves fleshy, the colors like undisturbed paint on an artist's palette, the air timberous, weaving in and out of swishing tree branches with the sar, sar, sar, of a string instrument."

Here the protagonist turns into a rhythm analyst who observes the rhythms of her surroundings through the window and then reflects upon the rhythms imprinted in her memories from the past. We can observe such observations in other stories; Sakina Bano observing the view from the flight window, Khadija observing the lawn from the window in "Paths Upon Water", Zenab observing the weather in "Chagrin".

Kitchen is another area where the memories negotiate with the present as we see Zenab revisiting her past and the customs of Pakistan in her Kitchen in Connecticut. The very question on whether Zenab should use Halal chicken in preparing the feast for her aunt proves how the diaspora is attached to the culture and memories of their homeland. The rhythms of the kitchen bring back those mental rhythms or past memories and try to negotiate with the space. Here the diaspora remains a participant and a passive observer in order to negotiate the time and space they are subjected to. In some cases the rhythms of the Kitchen are disrupted by integrating it with those of the homeland as we see Zenab's mother trying to cook the "Mexican" karelas the Pakistani way. Zenab remains a rhythm analyst who observes the intermingling of rhythms; the rhythms surrounding her and the flooding of memories from the past.

Her garden is in Lahore. There the karelas are small, delicate in shape and fine-skinned. But this afternoon she is in my town, a small New England town where summer recklessly crowds life into foliage with such abandon that the blue of the sky and the brown of the earth assume distant, foggy faces...I remember the cool, wet sensation of the juices as it flew into my face, the sharp acrid aroma of the skins combining with the smoke from my grandmother's hookah and filling my nose until I could smell nothing else, the brisk chattered conversation interjected with laughter and head-slapping gestures that passed between my aunts, Amma and my grandmother, the picture of the naked vegetables after they had been fully cleaned, each smooth and clear like a baby's behind, and myself, a girl-child who had no taste for such a bitter vegetable

Home is a space where many rhythms interact and interplay to create a perfect ‘lived’ experience. As the help “to recall the flashes of daydreams that illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected...through dreams, the various dwelling –places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days.” (Gaston 5) When memories of the past come rushing in the diasporic subject live” fixations of happiness” (5) the subject relives the memories of stability and thus comforts themselves. No dwelling place is new but retention of memories of all the past dwelling places. These memories are rhythms which integrate with the rhythms of the surroundings and thus negotiate with the space for a perfect domestic experience. But essentially as Zenab says “all (of the past) is not lost” (Naqvi 114)

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